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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COTONOU 000217

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SUBJECT: BENIN: LEGISLATIVE ELECTION PREPARATIONS CONTINUE AMID RISK
OF POSTPONEMENT

REF: A) 06 COTONOU 1226; B) 06 COTONOU 1213

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Two coalitions and one party seem to be the major contenders in Benin's March 25 legislative elections. Without clearly developed policy stances to distinguish the candidates, the elections have assumed the form of a referendum on the Yayi government's performance during its first-year in office, with one coalition slate clearly emerging as the Yayi-favored candidates. However, arguments over how to transport electoral materials, budget problems, and apparently dysfunctional leadership of the national electoral commission have combined to feed rumors that the vote may have to be postponed for a week or two. After a March 20 meeting with election commission officials, at which Yayi promised to cover per diem costs, the elections once again appear likely to take place as scheduled. END SUMMARY.

TWENTY-SIX PARTIES AND COALITIONS ARE RUNNING

12. (SBU) Of the twenty-six parties and coalitions to submit candidate lists, three appear to have reasonable hopes of winning a significant number of the 83 seats in the National Assembly on March 25. President Yayi has given his informal endorsement to the Force Cowrie for an Emergent Benin (FCBE), and was reportedly involved personally in choosing the FCBE's slate. The FCBE manifesto is little more than a call to support Yayi and give the President a clear legislative majority to enact his program.

13. (SBU) Yayi's forces may well win big. However, a vocal alternative has emerged in the Democratic Renewal Party (PRD), supported by Adrien Houngbedji, whom Yayi defeated in the run-off of the 2006 presidential elections. The PRD's election manifesto is negative, criticizing the government's failure to improve the economy or people's daily lives. How well the PRD does will serve as a useful measure of whether Yayi still enjoys a political honeymoon, or whether the public has grown fed-up with continued power cuts, the disappointing cotton harvest and continued criminality across the country. Another major coalition, the Dynamic Democratic Alliance (ADD), brings together the parties of the third, fourth and fifth-place candidates from the first round of the 2006 presidential elections. All three endorsed Yayi in the second round, but their subsequent relationship with Yayi has been far from smooth. Therefore the ADD cannot be described as either pro- or anti-Yayi, muddying its campaign strategy. The historical strength of the three main coalition members in their regional strongholds means ADD could well emerge with an important number of seats in the new legislature.

¶4. (U) CAVEAT: While we think these three slates will win a large majority of the seats in the next legislature, that is far from certain. Benin has no pollsters and no professional media coverage of the campaign (most newspaper reports on the election campaign are paid for by the candidates themselves). So it is possible that, among the other twenty-three slates, there may be one or two with electoral appeal about which we are unaware. END CAVEAT.

MANAGEMENT AND BUDGETARY CONCERNS THREATEN TIMELY ELECTION

¶5. (SBU) In the meantime, the Independent National Election Commission (CENA) has struggled from crisis to crisis. One key Embassy civil society contact told the Ambassador on March 20 that this year's CENA was "the worst we have ever had in Benin." According to this contact, the troubles began when the CENA members selected an ineffective party functionary allied with a second-tier slate as CENA president. The CENA then got into a stare-down with the government over whether to use military vehicles to transport electoral materials as a cost-saving (and graft-avoiding) measure. The CENA caved on the issue after two weeks of delay, but only after publicly airing their internal disagreements in the media (local media coverage of the workings of the CENA is much more informative than that of the election itself). Currently, some local level election officials have refused to deliver the voter registration lists they compiled to the CENA, until they are paid a lump sum beyond their allotted per diem. As of March 20, the CENA was still awaiting voter lists from five departments out of twelve in the country.

¶6. (SBU) This week as well, CENA's internal strains came to a head, with a majority of CENA members objecting to the Commission President's unilateral decision to award the ballot printing contract to a printer who had not been recommended by the CENA's procurement committee. On March 20, by a vote of 20 in favor with 3 abstentions, the CENA members replaced the President with another

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CENA member allied to a different second-tier slate. The CENA also overturned the award of the ballot printing contract, and said it would take measures to ensure that two versions of the ballot would not circulate. A CENA member told the Embassy privately on March 19 that it was possible, due to these difficulties, that the CENA might ask the government to postpone the elections, at least for a few days.

¶7. (U) The government has grown so concerned by the confusion in the election bodies, that it publicly convoked all of the country's election officials to a meeting at the Presidential Palace on March ¶20. At that meeting, President Yayi assured the officials that the government would compensate them, and urged them to fulfill their duties. Media reports claimed this has calmed the election officials. Outstanding voter lists are supposed to be handed over to the CENA on March 21 at the latest.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: With the developments of March 20, it appears Benin's legislative elections will be held on schedule on March 25. Postponement of the elections would be a serious embarrassment for Benin, tarnishing its reputation as a beacon of stability and democracy in West Africa. It need not, however, provoke a constitutional or political crisis -- as long as the postponement is endorsed by both the government and the Constitutional Court, and lasts no longer than a week or so to allow the CENA to pull itself together and organize the elections. In any case, Post plans to observe the election in major population centers. END COMMENT.

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